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Thoughts on Visiting the LaFayette City Cemetery during the Pandemic

7-9 minutes

We've been sheltering in place up in Walker county. Public colleges in Georgia went to "remote instruction" for the last six weeks or so of the semester, which means I had to work from home, wherever that might be. Jessica suggested that we stay in LaFayette, so she might help her grandmother. So here we are.



Grave of Walker County historian J. A. Sartain

A few weeks ago, I started taking walks in the LaFayette city cemetery. It's scenic and serene, and the people there maintain the proper social distance (always six feet away). On earlier visits to the cemetery, Jessica had pointed out the graves of family members, neighbors, and prominent locals, mostly unfamiliar to me, but there was one name that I recognized: James Alfred Sartain, the author, back in 1931, of [A History of Walker County](#).

In 1929 the Georgia General Assembly encouraged each of Georgia's counties to write its history as part of the state's upcoming bicentennial. (Georgia was settled as a British colony in 1733, so 1933 would be 200 years.) About three dozen of the county histories were published. A few years ago, I read those bicentennial county histories, including Sartain's, as part of a larger project on public memory in Georgia in the early twentieth century. "The books are full of facts and lore, and often they are the most convenient way of getting at parts of the past," I wrote. "But for us as historians, perhaps their greatest significance is as historic documents, telling us as much about the historians (and their audiences) as about the past they described." I knew J. A. Sartain from that project.

Most of the county historians wrote from the perspective of [the Lost Cause](#), a revision of southern history that emphasized the "rightness" of the Confederate cause. Sartain was one of a handful of the county historians who did not rely on the Lost Cause to explain the past. And he was no fan of the martial spirit that seemed to define so much of southern culture. His discussion of the Battle of Chickamauga starts with a mention of Union's desire to "bring an end to the fratricidal clash" and ends with this:

“The battle over, the news began to trickle back home to the fireside – to mother, sister, friend. Vague and indistinct at first, it is; then suddenly it comes with a rashness that prostrates – ‘Robert is dead.’ ‘Killed in battle.’ Such heartbreaking news to the family circle, to friends and to the community! Never a word from him, – no good byes, no farewells, no mementos, no keepsakes from his person. Only silence and the vacant chair to cherish. It is all so harsh and unnatural. When will our civilizations arrive at the place where war will be outlawed? When they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks?”

I liked Sartain’s history, but I didn’t know much about his life. Sartain was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives for four terms in the 1930s, and from the state’s [Official Register](#) (available online, so a good source right now), I learned that he graduated from Howard College in Birmingham and became a teacher. He was county superintendent of the Walker county schools for four years in the 1920s.

Sartain emphasized the importance of education at the lower levels. “If you want your child to get a good education and succeed in life, don’t fail to give him the right foundation,” he said in 1923 (according to the [Walker County Messenger](#), available on-line through the Digital Library of Georgia’s Historic Newspapers). “Look out for his grammar grade training. This is the foundation. This is fundamental. Some parents begin to get anxious about their boys and girls when they get about 14 years of age. The time to get anxious is at 6 or even earlier” (9/14/1923).

Sartain was especially a champion of the rural schools. In 1922, the *Messenger* summarized an interview with the new superintendent: “Walker County has splendid country homes, good

farms etc., but is woefully behind in the matter of education in the rural districts” (1/20/1922). According to the [*Educational Survey of Walker County, Georgia*](#) (1921), the “city schools” (LaFayette and Chickamauga) were in pretty good shape, but the fifty-plus rural schools lagged far behind. The statistics are generally divided into “larger schools,” “two-teacher schools,” and “one-teacher schools.” The differences were astounding. In the one- and two-teacher schools, teachers were poorly trained (half had not gone past the ninth grade, and a quarter had stopped at the seventh) and inexperienced (over a third were in their first year of teaching). Smaller schools were usually open for just six months a year (compared to nine for the larger schools). As a result, rural students had much lower test scores (including the Monroe Silent Reading Test, the Trabue Language Scales, and the Woody-McCall Arithmetic test – who knew that there were so many standardized tests a hundred years ago?) and fewer than one student in six made it to seventh grade.

The last section of the *Educational Survey* contains pictures and statistics for the individual schools. The city school buildings on the first few pages of this section are big and beautiful, well-maintained, and obviously cost a good bit to build and keep up. But that is followed by page after page of small rural schools.

Waterville School has two teachers, Miss Gladys Duncan and Miss Sadie Martin. The one-room building is “in good condition,” but “needs painting outside.” The grounds are “unimproved but ample,” with “two toilets, in bad condition.” The school has seventy-one students across eight grades.

Villanow School’s one room, “improperly lighted,” has a “fairly good blackboard; no maps; no charts; no globes; no library; a few

pictures; a reference dictionary.” Its two teachers, W. N. Morgan and Mrs. Ewing Reed, have eighty-six students in nine grades.

Henderson School, “one room, very small and unsuited for schoolroom,” has one teacher (Miss Chloe Kinsey) and thirty-seven students in seven grades. And so on.

This survey was published in 1921, the year Sartain became county school superintendent. He pushed for consolidation of those rural schools (newer and better-equipped school buildings) and higher pay (to attract and retain more qualified teachers).

“These boys and girls are gems and flowers,” he said, “but unless they get the proper training and culture, they must lose their power and beauty.”

So tomorrow, when I pass J. A. Sartain’s grave, I will nod as I always do to a fellow historian who had no use for the Lost Cause, but I will also think of a man who understood the value of education and devoted his life to it, especially for the thousands of rural students in Walker county who deserved as good an education as their city cousins.

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[David Parker](#)

David B. Parker, a native of North Carolina, is Professor of History at Kennesaw State University. He has written on humorist Bill Arp,

evangelist Sam Jones, novelist Marian McCamy Sims,
Confederate textbooks, the history of the word "y'all," and other
southern topics.